



steepenTM

ed brubaker
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#7
SEP



Sean
2003

SUGGESTED
FOR MATURE
READERS

WILDSTORM.COM



An hour after Miss Misery passes out, I'm still staring at the ceiling.

Trying to tell myself I was just drunk, or that I made a mistake.



That my mind is playing tricks on me.



Except I can't get drunk, and I don't usually see things that aren't really there...



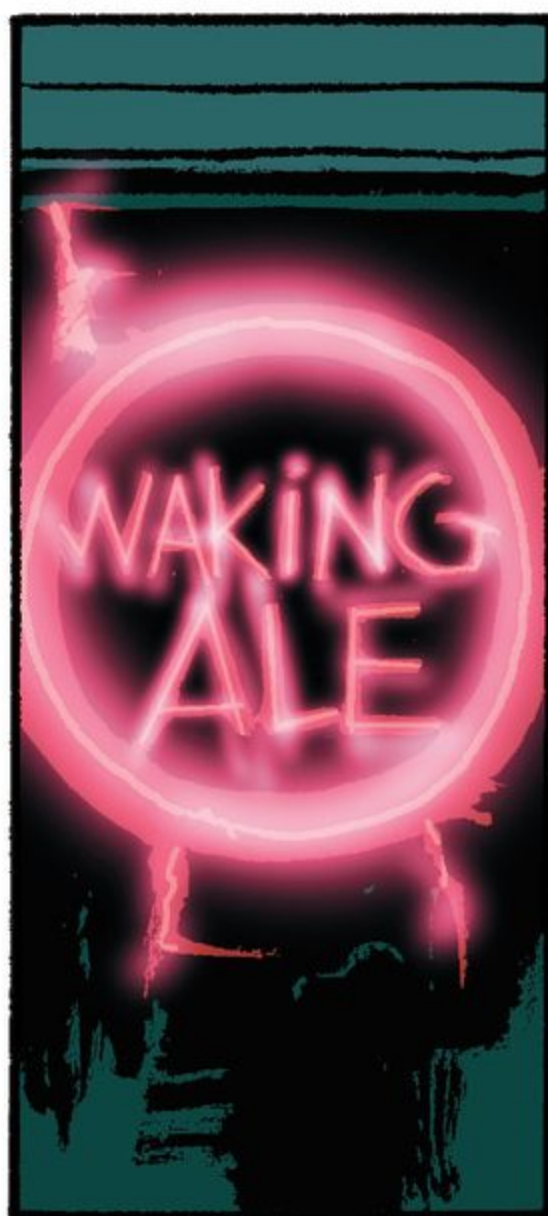
...So what I saw tonight wasn't possible...

...SHOULD'VE SEEN YOUR FACE... NEVER LAUGHED SO MUCH IN MY LIFE...

MY FACE, WHAT ABOUT HIS FACE? YOU ONLY BIT HIS FUCKING NOSE OFF...







What the hell
is going on?



If this were a year ago, I'd
walk that path a few times
a week on the way home...



...And if those signs
were all there, I'd
know what it
meant.



That Lynch
had left me
a message.



That he needed
to meet me.



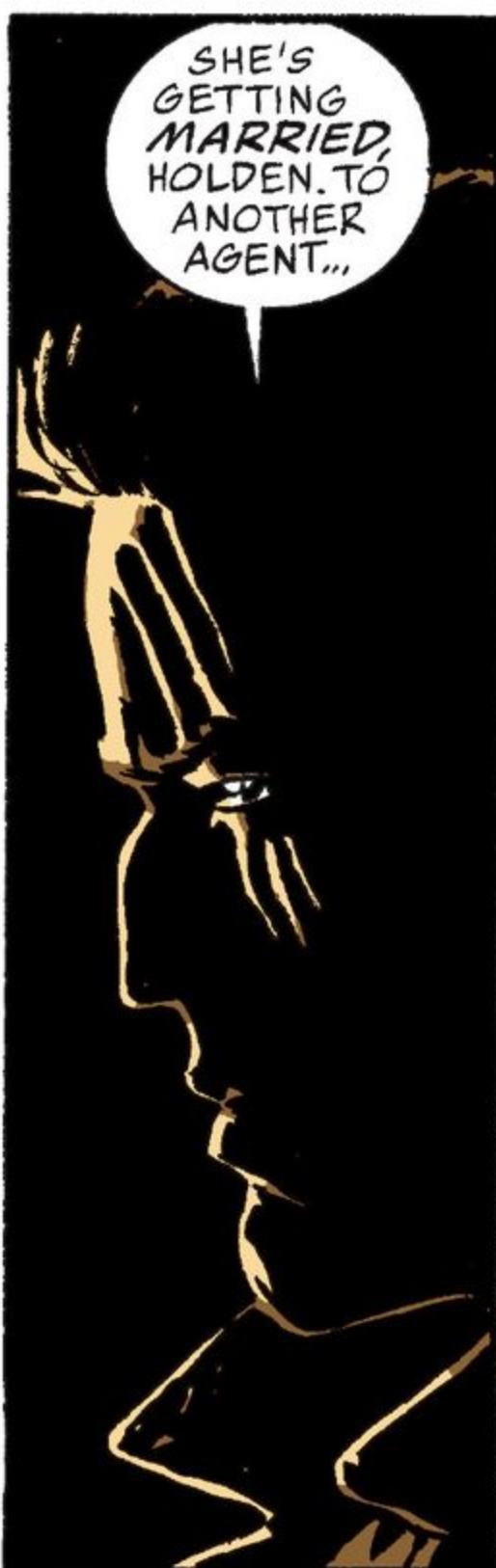
But this isn't a year ago,
and Lynch is in a coma, and
I'm stuck out here on my
own...

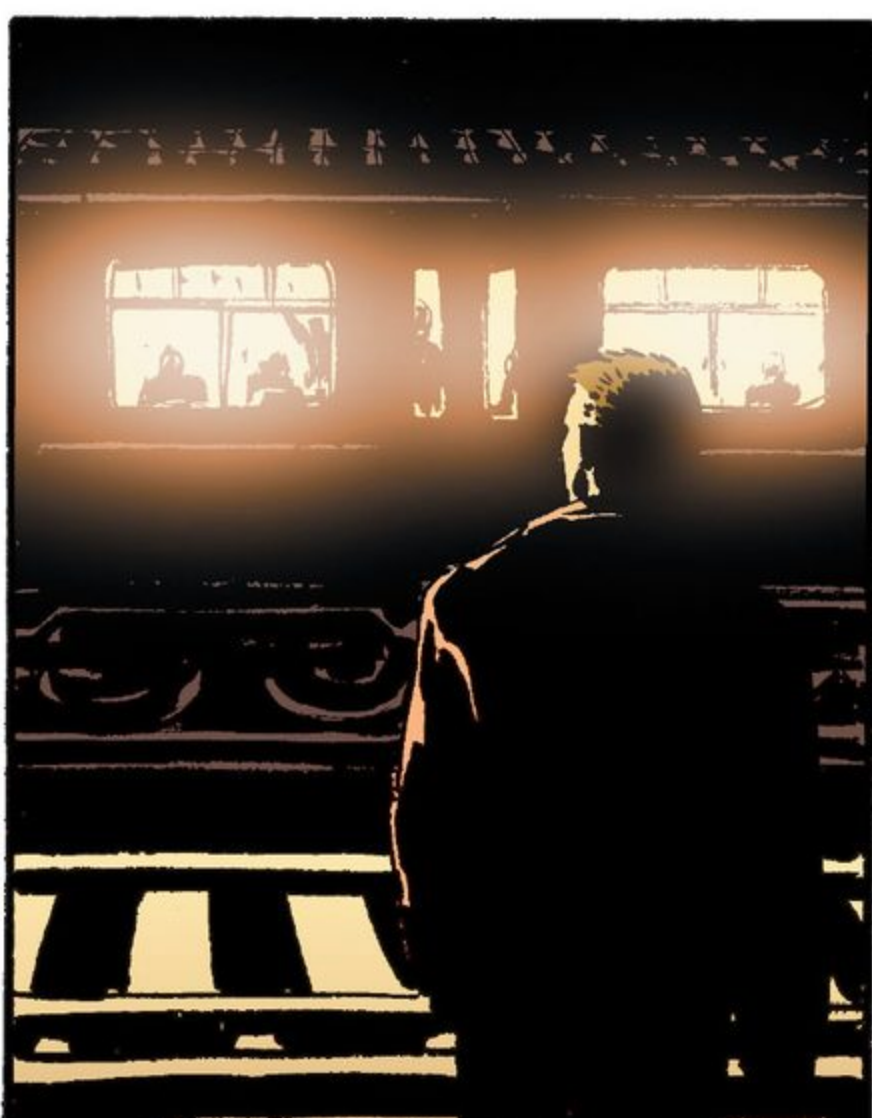




...So just what in the hell is going on?







WHERE'D
YOU GO...?



... I WOKE
UP AND YOU
WERE JUST
GONE.



I JUST FELT
LIKE WALKING THE
PERIMETER. OLD
HABITS...

WORRIED
SOMEONE
MIGHT'VE BEEN
FOLLOWING
US BEFORE.



REALLY?
I DIDN'T NOTICE
ANYONE.



WELL, YOU WERE PRETTY
WASTED... ANYWAY, I
WAS PROBABLY JUST
BEING PARANOID...

HEY, DO YOU REALLY
HAVE TO SMOKE A
FUCKING CIGAR IN
HERE?



YES...



SO, WHAT?
YOU THINK
PETER GRIMM
IS HAVING YOU
FOLLOWED
NOW?

NOT REALLY. I DON'T KNOW...
IT'D BE JUST PERFECT IF HE
AND TAO FOUND OUT ABOUT **US**
RIGHT NOW, THOUGH,
WOULDN'T IT?



JESUS FUCKING CHRIST,
HOLDEN... **RELAX**. NEITHER
OF THEM REALLY GIVES A
DAMN THAT YOU PUT **PIT**
BULL IN THE HOSPITAL.

COULD'VE
FOOLED
ME.



NO, PETER JUST
HATES TO SEE ANYONE
ON THE OTHER SIDE
LEFT **ALIVE**.

YOU LETTING YOUR
EX-GIRLFRIEND'S NEW
HUSBAND WALK AWAY
ON HIS OWN TWO FEET
WAS JUST A LITTLE TOO
MUCH FOR HIM,
THAT'S ALL.



I EXPLAINED ALL
OF THAT. THERE
WAS **NO PERCENT-**
AGE IN KILLING HIM
... IT WOULD'VE JUST
TURNED UP THE
HEAT ON US
AGAIN.

I'M NOT
ARGUING WITH
YOU, HOLDEN.
I'M JUST SAY-
ING THAT'S WHY
PETER HAS YOU
UNDER HIS
MICRO-
SCOPE.



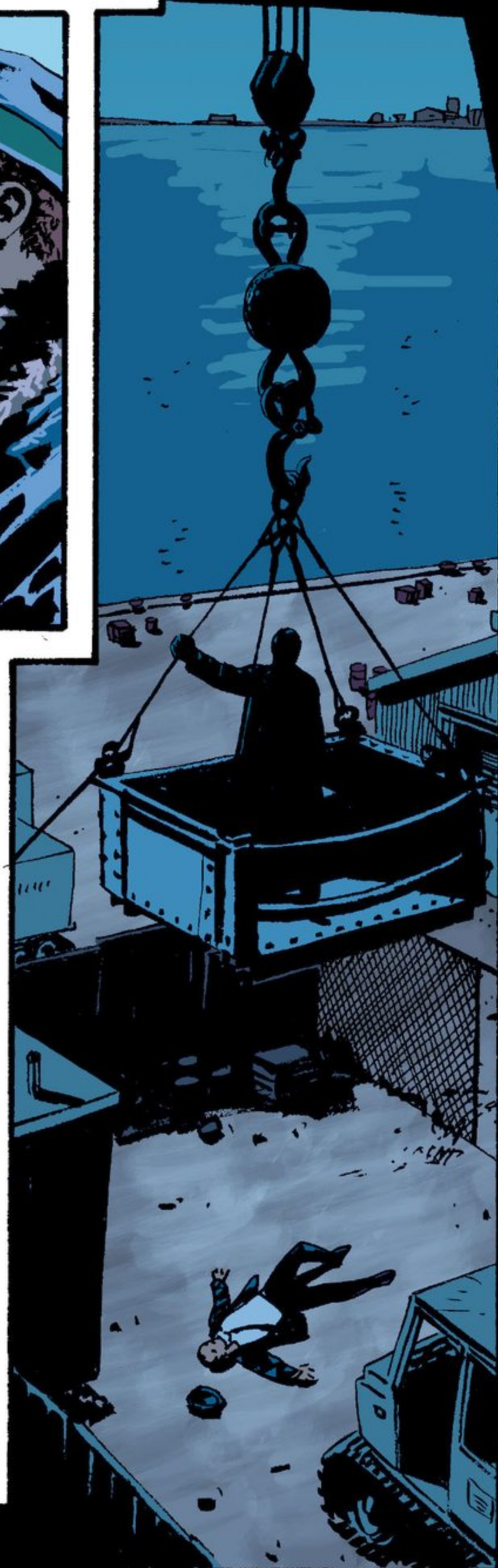
AND AS FOR
BEATING PIT BULL
HALF TO DEATH... WELL,
THAT'S JUST A
TURN-ON...

ALTHOUGH I MAY
NOT **EXACTLY** BE
THE BEST JUDGE
ON THAT ONE.



If only I could take Miss Misery's advice and not worry about Peter Grimm's suspicions.

But I've got far too many other reasons to be constantly looking over my shoulder, anyway...



According to the code in the note, whoever the hell was using Lynch's protocols wanted to meet me the next night.

Proper procedures or not, though, I wasn't about to waltz into a trap.

I mean, shit, I didn't even know which side a trap would come from anymore, so I came prepared for every eventuality.

The spot for the meeting was one of Lynch's old favorites, a dead end alley in the Meat Packing District.

And it looks like my mystery contact is a no-show...

...until I switch the binoculars over to thermal vision.

Then I see him, in the shadows, just waiting.

ALL RIGHT, NOW
WHO THE FUCK ARE
YOU, YOU SON OF
A FUCK?

He waits in the dark so long
that I'm tempted to go
down and meet him.

And after another
hour, I'm tempted
to take him out,
just to play it
safe.

But then he gives
up, and I get what
I came for...

...his picture.

chkkk- WRRR
chkkk- WRR

I can't use my own computer for this, because I'm worried someone might be monitoring it...

...and I don't have the current access codes to get into any government systems from an outside line...

...so I get creative.

GRIMM-SECTION LEADER

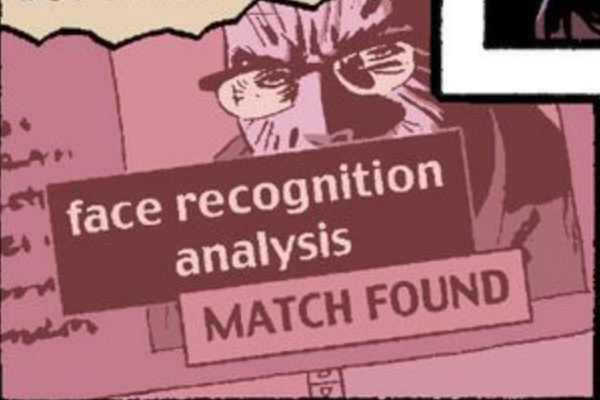
Miss Misery let it slip that Peter Grimm had flown to Hong Kong last night for a few days, so his system will work fine.

The beauty of this operation is that I don't even need his password, because I'm not after any encrypted files...

...I just need to access a database.

Years ago, Tao created back-doors into a lot of international governmental systems and databases.

And the software he designed for this hacking is so sophisticated that we actually get results faster than I.O. or the F.B.I. does even though we're using their servers.



I have no idea how he managed that one, but I'm glad he did...



...because I just barely get the information I need downloaded to micro-chip before I'm interrupted...

AGENT CARVER?

WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING IN HERE?



My mind races for a second... I erased all records of my activities during the download, so I should be clean.

But with computers, you just never know.



I'M SORRY, SIR... I KNOW I **SHOULDN'T** HAVE, BUT WITH THE WAY THINGS'VE BEEN BETWEEN ME AND PETER GRIMM, WELL...



...I WAS TRYING TO HACK HIS SYSTEM TO SEE WHAT HE'S GOT ON ME.





IT'S JUST, PETER WASN'T AT ALL APOLOGETIC WHEN I CAUGHT HIM TAMPERING WITH *YOUR* COMPUTER.



WHEN WAS THAT?

MUST'VE BEEN A MONTH AGO, AT LEAST... BEFORE THE PIT BULL INCIDENT.



THAT SON OF A BITCH.



LISTEN TO ME, HOLDEN. PETER GRIMM IS A GOOD STRONG RIGHT HAND TO ME, BUT I'VE *NEVER* DONE MY *THINKING* WITH MY RIGHT HAND.

IT'S USUALLY RESERVED FOR *ANOTHER* ACTIVITY...



SO, WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?



I'VE ALLOWED THIS LITTLE *RIVALRY* BETWEEN YOU AND HE TO GO ON, MOSTLY OUT OF SIMPLE *AMUSEMENT*...

... BUT MISS MISERY HAS POINTED OUT THAT YOU BOTH HAVE *WORK* TO DO AND I CAN'T HAVE YOU *CONSTANTLY* STABBING EACH OTHER IN THE BACK...



... NO MATTER *HOW* ENTERTAINING IT MAY BE.

SO, I'M ENDING IT NOW.



I'LL SPEAK WITH PETER WHEN HE GETS BACK. LET HIM KNOW THAT IF I NEED ANY OF MY PRODIGALS *INVESTIGATED*, I CAN DO IT *MYSELF*.

WELL... THAT'S COMFORTING.



I THOUGHT YOU'D SAY THAT...



NOW, IF YOU'RE DONE WITH YOUR *ESPIONAGE*, THERE'S SOMETHING I WANT YOU TO SEE IN THE DUNGEON...

OF COURSE, SIR...



I wait a week, to make sure everything is safe, before I make a move.

Tao doesn't appear to be watching me any closer than usual, and Peter Grimm keeps his distance... but I know I can't trust anything Tao says.

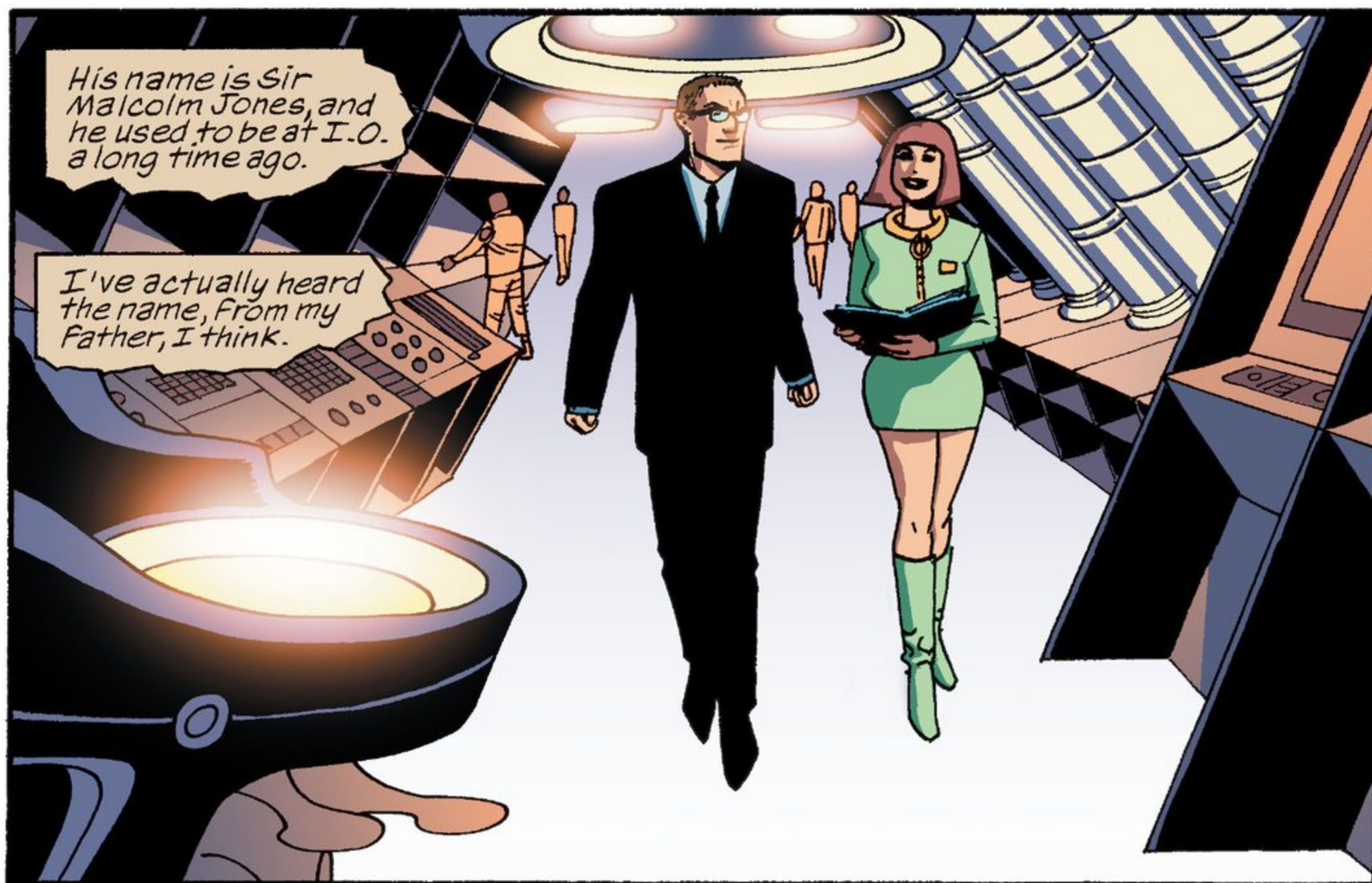
I'm positive he checked Peter's computer to see what I used it for. So all I can do is hope my clean-up program worked. I got it from Lynch so it probably did.

Thursday night, the contact signals are all in place again...

... and there's another note waiting at the dead drop.

And again, he leaves me a time and place for a meeting.

But at least now I know who he is...



His name is Sir Malcolm Jones, and he used to be at I.O. a long time ago.

I've actually heard the name, from my father, I think.



According to his file, the parts that I was able to access, after his time at I.O. he worked as a consultant for MI6, which probably explains how an American national ended up being knighted.



From what I gather, reading between the lines of various reports and looking at the man's career, Sir Malcolm was hardcore.

Serious counter-intelligence work, with a background in the hands on network, as well.

Here's the problem:
Sir Malcolm Jones has
been retired for
over a decade.

And like a lot of
spooks, when he
retired, he just
disappeared.

So why is he surfacing
here, now, and trying
to contact me with
Lynch's signals and
protocols?

Who the hell
is he working
for this time?

He doesn't wait
around quite as
long this time...

...so maybe I won't have to wait too long to get my answers, either.



FEEL FREE TO STEP INTO THE **LIGHT**, AGENT CARVER. I'M PRETTY CERTAIN **YOU** WERE THE ONLY ONE WHO FOLLOWED ME HOME...



